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ABSTRACT

An anonymous questionnaire was administered to 593 (310 female, 283 male) freshmen entering the University of Maryland, College Park. Their responses were analyzed by analysis of variance, Scheffe post hoc tests and chi square, all at the .05 level. Results showed that women looked more favorably upon women's studies as an academic discipline than did men and showed more interest in taking women's studies courses. While both men and women seemed to accept the common belief that women's studies is not a good choice for a major (and indicate overwhelmingly that they would not major in this discipline), in general neither men nor women see women's studies as a passing fad. It is particularly important that the only thing that men and women agreed on in the study was some ambivalence about the practicality of a women's studies major in finding a job. This would seem to be a major issue with which women's studies programs must deal in this day of vocationally-oriented students, and a prime area for further research. (Author)

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UNIVERSITY STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN'S STUDIES

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SUMMARY

An anonymous questionnaire was administered to 593 (310 female; 283 male) freshmen entering the University of Maryland, College Park. Their responses were analyzed by analysis of variance, Scheffe' post hoc tests and chi square, all at the .05 level. Results showed that women looked more favorably upon women's studies as an academic discipline than did men and showed more interest in taking women's studies courses.

While both men and women seemed to accept the common belief that women's studies is not a good choice for a major (and indicate overwhelmingly that they would not major in this discipline) it is interesting to note that in general neither men nor women see women's studies as a passing fad. It is particularly important that the only thing that men and women agreed on in the study was some ambivalence about the practicality of a women's studies major in finding a job. This would seem to be a major issue with which women's studies programs must deal in this day of vocationally oriented students, and a prime area for further research.

The first formal program in women's studies in the U. S. was instituted at San Diego State College in the Spring of 1970; during that same year Cornell University started its own program. Since 1970 the number of women's studies courses and programs has increased rapidly. In 1975 there were approximately 4000 of these courses which had been instituted at colleges and universities throughout the U. S. (Advisory Committee on Women's Studies, 1975), and interest in these courses had reached into the high schools (Siporin, 1972).

According to a telephone survey of a random sample of University of Maryland students (Herman & Sedlacek, 1973), there was much interest in the establishment of courses in women's studies at the College Park campus. Eighty-six percent of those students surveyed felt that there was a need for such courses, while 57% reported that they would take a women's studies course were it offered. Herman and Sedlacek concluded in their report that "steps ought to be taken at the University of Maryland to implement a women's studies curriculum. Students surveyed were overwhelmingly in favor of such an undertaking (p. 6)."

This conclusion was not unlike that being reached on many college and university campuses throughout the nation at that time (Robinson, 1973).

In the Spring of 1974, partly as a response to the interest reflected in the Herman and Sedlacek survey, an informal program in women's studies was instituted at the University of Maryland, College Park. The program has grown rapidly, with a proposal for adoption of a certificate program in women's studies under active consideration (Women's Studies Advisory Committee, 1976). During the Fall semester of 1975, 22 undergraduate and 3 graduate level courses in 11 different academic departments were offered as women's studies courses. For the Spring, 1976 semester the number of such courses offered was increased by approximately one-third.

While women's studies programs are developing quite rapidly nationwide, there are important issues with which program organizers are grappling (Astin & Parelman, 1973). Some of these issues fall under the general category of academic accountability. One concern is the respectability of women's studies courses themselves: are courses dealing specifically with women, their roles and contributions to the history of civilization academically rigorous and worthy of a place in an institution of higher education? Or are these courses soft, "gut" courses, and easy A's, especially for women? Closely related is the question: should women's studies be a separate department or should the courses be special courses subsumed under the traditional academic departments? This question takes on renewed importance in these days of tight university budgets and faculty cuts.

An important concern of both the organizers of the programs and the students taking the courses is the value of a background in women's studies. Is women's studies a marketable major? Will graduates be able to get into graduate schools in something other than the same discipline?

Ultimately, the resolution of such issues will be of crucial importance in determining the fate and future of these programs. Important also, however, are students' attitudes toward these issues. For example, it is probable that if students consider a women's studies major worthless they will not pursue it. Knowledge of what students believe about these issues will be extremely important not only in developing the program itself, but also in educating prospective students about what the program is and what it is good for.

This study was an attempt to measure prospective students' attitudes toward issues such as those discussed above, and their perceptions of the women's

studies program at the University of Maryland. It was also an attempt to gather information on the types of individuals who are attracted to women's studies courses.

#### Method

An anonymous questionnaire concerning incoming students' knowledge of and attitudes toward women's studies was administered to a random sample of 310 female and 283 male incoming freshmen at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Attitude items were analyzed by analysis of variance, Scheffe' post hoc tests and chi square all at the .05 level.

#### Results

Table I shows means and standard deviations on the attitude items for males and females. Males tended to agree most strongly that women's studies courses: are worthwhile for females (item 13), are helpful to women in assessing abilities and aptitudes and in educational planning (item 27), have nothing to offer me (item 12), are useful in coping with rapid changes in relations between the sexes (item 26), and are necessary to examine myths about women (item 24). Females tended to agree most strongly that women's studies courses: are useful in coping with rapid changes in relations between the sexes (item 26), are worthwhile for females and males (items 13 and 14), are helpful to women in assessing abilities and aptitudes and in educational planning (item 27), and are necessary to examine myths about women (item 24).

Males tended to disagree most strongly that they took course or participated in extracurricular activities related to women's studies in high school (items 4 and 6), that they plan to take many women's studies courses or major in women's studies (items 8 and 9), or that their high school offered women's studies courses. Females tended to disagree most strongly that: women's studies

courses should be open to women only (item 21), they took a women's studies course in high school (item 4), they would major in women's studies (item 9), their high school offered a course in women's studies (item 3), and that women's studies courses should be taught by women only.

All the items in Table I showed significant differences between male and female respondents except item 10 which stated that women's studies would not be good preparation for a job. Females were consistently more positive toward women's studies than males on all other items.

Thirty-seven percent of the women, but only 5% of the men, planned to take a women's studies course at Maryland, while 2% of the women and none of the men would major in women's studies if they had a chance. This is in striking contrast to the results on the Herman and Sedlacek (1973) survey. They found that 57% (73% of the women and 38% of the men) responded positively to the item: I would take a course on women if it were offered at the University.

Other statistically significant differences showed that students (male or female) whose mothers were employed planned to take more women's studies courses (item 8) than those whose mothers were not employed. Also students (male or female) whose fathers were skilled or unskilled workers were less likely to feel that a separate study of women was useful (item 18), than students whose fathers were employed in clerical-sales or professional-managerial occupations. Another statistically significant difference was that Jewish students were less likely to be interested in women's studies courses or the separate study of women (items 7, 12 and 18) compared to students of other religions.

#### Discussion

There is clearly less interest in women's studies reflected in the present study than was indicated by the responses in the Herman and Sedlacek (1973)

survey. This may not be surprising since the present study reflects prospective students' stated intentions of taking courses which actually do exist, while Herman and Sedlacek reported matriculated students' stated willingness to take such courses if they did exist (recall that the survey was done at a time when they did not exist). One might interpret the response in the present study to be an indication of a firmer commitment on the part of those surveyed. At any rate, these two results are clearly not directly comparable.

In general it can be seen that, as might be expected, women look more favorably upon women's studies as an academic discipline than do men; women also indicate more of an interest in taking these courses, and are more likely to have participated in courses and activities relevant to women's studies while in high school.

While both men and women seemed to accept the common belief that women's studies is not a good choice for a major (and indicate overwhelmingly that they would not major in this discipline) it is interesting to note that, in general, ~~neither men nor women see women's studies as a passing fad.~~ It is particularly important that the only thing that men and women agreed on in the study was some ambivalence about the practicality of a women's studies major in finding a job. This would seem to be a major issue with which women's studies programs must deal in this day of vocationally oriented students, and a prime area for further research.

What seems to be reflected in these results is a skepticism about a relatively new academic discipline (especially among the males, but also among females). The attitude is one which indicates no great lack of interest in these courses, but also reflects a reluctance to immediately and enthusiastically

embrace women's studies as a major part of an individual's curriculum. Perhaps the discipline must prove itself worthwhile and useful before more students become interested and involved in women's studies courses.

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Table I

## Means\* and Standard Deviations by Sex on Attitude Items

	<u>Males</u>		<u>Females</u>	
	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>
1. I am aware of the Women's Studies Program at Maryland.	3.10	1.07	2.93	1.21
2. I have a fairly good idea of what Women's Studies are.	3.51	.98	3.24	1.09
3. My high school offered at least one course in Women's Studies.	3.91	1.20	3.82	1.35
4. I took at least one course in Women's Studies in high school.	4.41	.94	4.15	1.18
5. My high school offered extracurricular activities concerning women's issues.	3.62	1.32	3.66	1.41
6. I participated in extracurricular activities concerning women's issues while in high school.	4.41	.93	4.04	1.20
7. I plan to take at least one course in Women's Studies while at Maryland.	3.94	1.01	2.68	1.02
8. I plan to take as many Women's Studies courses as I can while at Maryland.	4.39	.83	3.61	.93
9. I would major in Women's Studies if there were such a major at Maryland.	4.58	.68	4.11	.85
10. A major in Women's Studies would not be a good preparation for getting a job after graduation.	3.01	1.36	2.98	1.16
11. Prospective employers might be prejudiced against me if I majored in Women's Studies.	2.82	1.20	3.11	1.10
12. I believe Women's Studies courses would have nothing to offer me.	2.61	1.37	3.64	1.05
13. Women's Studies courses are worthwhile for females.	2.06	.94	2.27	1.00
14. Women's Studies courses are worthwhile for males.	3.21	1.09	2.31	1.08

\*1 = Strongly agree; 5 = Strongly disagree

Table I  
(Continued)

Means\* and Standard Deviations by Sex on Attitude Items

	<u>Males</u>		<u>Females</u>	
	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>
15. Interest in Women's Studies is a fad which will most probably be short-lived.	3.38	1.04	3.78	.94
16. There should be a separate academic department of Women's Studies at Maryland.	3.33	1.01	3.18	.94
17. The study of women is not an appropriate subject at an academic institution.	3.56	1.09	3.79	.96
18. A separate study of women will not teach us anything that we can not learn from the courses traditionally offered in college.	3.48	1.05	3.76	.93
19. Women's Studies courses should be included in the individual departments rather than in a separate Women's Studies department.	2.86	1.01	2.71	.98
20. Women's Studies courses should be taught by women only.	3.65	1.06	3.80	1.01
21. Women's Studies courses should be open to women only.	3.81	1.06	4.30	.80
22. It would be easy to get good grades in a Women's Studies course.	3.25	.78	3.47	.84
23. Women's Studies courses are necessary to eliminate male bias in the established curriculum at the University.	3.38	1.08	2.93	1.04
24. Women's Studies courses are necessary to examine conscious and unconscious myths about women.	2.81	1.04	2.35	.99
25. Establishment of Women's Studies courses is necessary to give the study of women and sex differences a deserved place in higher education.	2.93	1.04	2.49	.96
26. Women's Studies courses are helpful in enabling people to cope with the rapid changes in relations between the sexes.	2.72	1.03	2.26	.89
27. Women's Studies courses are helpful to women in assessing their abilities and aptitudes and planning education compatible with them.	2.54	.94	2.29	.87

\*1 = Strongly agree; 5 = Strongly disagree